

Stephen Ferguson interviewed by Paul Vance

Paul: All right Fergie, today is January 30th. We are going to start our interview and we'll work with the first question. Please tell me your name, job title and where do you live?

Steven F.: My name is Steven Ferguson. My job title is electrician and I live in Middletown, New Jersey.

Paul: Nice. [00:00:30] What is your background and what are some of the hobbies that you might have?

Steven F.: Background?

Paul: What's your background, where you're born, are you ...

Steven F.: I was born in Brooklyn. I'm pretty much born and raised in Brooklyn, New York.

Paul: Are your parents from Brooklyn, New York?

Steven F.: Yes, they're both from Brooklyn.

Paul: What part of Brooklyn?

Steven F.: I want to say, [00:01:00] it's ... I guess it's Bensonhurst, but it's on the border line of Borough Park. One block is Burrow Park in one direction, the other block is Bensonhurst. They're both from two or three blocks from each other. [inaudible 00:01:12]

Paul: Do you have any hobbies?

Steven F.: I like to fish.

Paul: You do fish.

Steven F.: I am avid comic collector, although I haven't been able to. I've been a little bit out of the loop for a while, so I'm embarrassed [00:01:30] about that.

Paul: What?

Steven F.: I guess as far as hobbies, that's ...

Paul: That's about it.

Steven F.: That's about it. Video play games. I don't know if it's a hobby though.

Paul: It could be a hobby for some people. Some people actually make that into a profession. What division are you in with the local?

Steven F.: I'm in the A division, but I am in currently MIJ status.

Paul: What does that MIJ status refer to or [00:02:00] mean?

Steven F.: I believe it's Mechanic In Journey. It's the step right before A, which I believe is 18 months or something like that.

Paul: What type of work does that particular division deal with?

Steven F.: A division?

Paul: No, that MIJ division that you're in. What type of work do you guys do? What type of work do you do?

Steven F.: [00:02:30] Electrical work. Pretty standard electrical work, I guess. Probably the same electrical work that a A journeyman would be expected to be able to do.

Paul: Are you still training at that point?

Steven F.: Yes. Absolutely.

Paul: You still are training. Do you feel like you're always training?

Steven F.: I feel like you're always training. [00:03:00] I feel like there's too much to know in our field that you would ... Nobody knows everything. Even if you're a very, very, very smart person, you know a lot, it's almost ... Unless you are some savant, there's no way you're going to know everything.

Paul: Interesting.

Steven F.: You're always learning. Always learning.

Paul: That's a good thing. What jobs have you had before, starting [00:03:30] as an electrician?

Steven F.: No. I was a building maintenance person for Touro College. Before then, I had very menial jobs. I was a cashier at a supermarket.

Paul: Menial to you, right?

Steven F.: In the sense that I was a kid.

Paul: Did any of those jobs come into play as [00:04:00] you became an electrician?

Steven F.: I did some electrical work for the college, small stuff, like replace ballasts and stuff like that. If it was a big problem that ... They would have me call an actual electrician to come and fix it.

Paul: Oh, really?

Steven F.: Yeah. But it's also for liability purposes and stuff like that. God forbid I didn't do it right and then somebody [00:04:30] got hurt or electrocuted, they would call an actual electrician with insurance.

Paul: As a cashier, do you find any of those skills that you ... Do you use any of those skills in your ...

Steven F.: You know what working retail teaches you? How to deal with people, how to be a people person. That's what that teaches you, to me personally. Because you are dealing with the public [00:05:00] all day and different people all the time, different personalities all the time.

Paul: Wouldn't that be super important to your day to day work?

Steven F.: Yeah. I guess it is, because even in our line of work, sometimes you work with people that you may not like, that may not like you and you have kind of deal with it because you're with the guy every day. You have to kind of be this person's partner [00:05:30] sometimes. Right?

Paul: Yeah.

Steven F.: Basically, dealing with different personalities and being able to appeal to that particular type of person's way. You know what I mean? Some people like pats on the back, "You're doing a great job." Some people just like to talk. To get people going and just to keep it ...

Paul: Keep it moving.

Steven F.: Yeah, basically.

Paul: [00:06:00] How did you become an electrician? Do you have any family in the business, are you first generation?

Steven F.: I have a cousin, although I am first generation in my direct family.

Paul: Okay.

Steven F.: I have a cousin that ... I forgot to mention, I also did demolition for a guy and this is when I was talking to my cousin. I was doing demolition for this dude. It wasn't Union [00:06:30] or whatever, it was non-Union. I'm telling him what I do and stuff like that and he was just like, "You would be perfect for the Local. You should fill out an application." And I did.

Paul: How long after you filled out the application did you hear back from them?

Steven F.: I think it took them ... Oh, three years.

Paul: Three years?

Steven F.: Three years.

Paul: That's a long time waiting.

Steven F.: Yeah. I thought that it was like, "Aw, forget it. I'm not going to ..."

Paul: Did you continue working the demolition?

Steven F.: No, at that [00:07:00] time I was working for Touro College.

Paul: Oh, okay. In between, you did that. Working in demolition, did that help you navigate the construction site at all?

Steven F.: I guess kind of. It just gives you a sense of what you're going to be exposed to, because when you are demoing walls, the dust, the insulation and everything, it gives you a sense [00:07:30] of, "Oh, shit. This stuff is going to get on my skin. This is going to be like ..." What protection you should really take, when you should really be wearing a mask and stuff like that.

Paul: Interesting. Have you ever been in a situation or on a job site where there was hazardous material around you [00:08:00] and stuff like that?

Steven F.: I have, but not like hazardous material that I could come in direct contact with. You know what I mean? It was there, but-

Paul: But doing demolition ...

Steven F.: Oh no, not doing demolition. No, demolition I was doing residential homes.

Paul: Okay. Let's go back to, you became an electrician because?

Steven F.: Well, because at the time, working for Touro College wasn't really ... It's not really [00:08:30] a job you can do for the rest of your life. There really wasn't room for improvement, moving up the ladder, so to speak. Being a Union electrician is a much better job. Benefits and 401k and all that good stuff.

Paul: So the benefits are a helpful ...

Steven F.: Huge.

Paul: Major. You said you had family in the business?

Steven F.: I have a cousin.

Paul: Okay. [00:09:00] Did that help you in any way?

Steven F.: You know what, honestly, I feel like ... He probably initially got me to fill out the application. I waited for years to get in and then I went through the whole process like everybody else went through, as far as being an apprentice and going through the whole [00:09:30] apprenticeship program, being rotated every year at different shops, blah, blah, blah. He gave me incentive in the sense that this is what I really want to do for the rest of my life.

Paul: Like he showed you that it was a good job?

Steven F.: Yeah. Like this is a great job and this is ...

Paul: Would you have any knowledge prior to that, what the job ...

Steven F.: You know what? A person off [00:10:00] the street, you say the word electrician, all right you're a electrician. You deal with electricity, you deal with wiring and stuff like that, okay. But to be a part of Local 3, it's like being a part of a family, so to speak. The brotherhood is for real, you know? A person that's not involved in it doesn't really understand, but when you get involved in it ... [00:10:30] As a first year apprentice, you see it, and then as time goes on, you get to really feel like you're part of something, bigger than just your job, you know what I mean?

Paul: So talk about the brotherhood more. Being a part of what?

Steven F.: You're not only a part of ... I feel like. You're not only a part of a Union, Local 3 Brotherhood, like IBW, you're a part of that brotherhood. All Unions, so to speak, you're a Union worker. For instance, there's going [00:11:00] to be a rally tomorrow. It's not just going to be electricians there. You are a part of this huge ...

Paul: Umbrella?

Steven F.: Yeah, this huge umbrella of workers that all pretty much ... We all wake up early in the morning, we all start very early, we all have the same commute and the same bullshit and we get paid the same way. It's all the same. Everybody knows each other's hardships, so to speak, you know what I mean?

Paul: Do you all get paid the same way?

Steven F.: [00:11:30] Well, yeah. I think we pretty much do. It's like a Thursday or Friday paycheck.

Paul: Oh, okay. In that sense. I got you.

Steven F.: Oh no, you mean amount? I don't know. There's definitely electricians that get paid more than us. Right?

Paul: I'm not sure, maybe.

Steven F.: Steamfitters make more than us.

Paul: Oh, really?

Steven F.: Yeah.

Paul: Interesting. Describe your current job site.

Steven F.: Describe it.

Paul: Yeah. What ...

Steven F.: It's an old [00:12:00] office building. There were offices in there. I was there when they started demoing it.

Paul: So you were there from the very beginning.

Steven F.: At the very beginning. There were offices in there already. It was some type of ... I don't know what it was, but it was run down very badly. There were some type of offices in there. Maybe it was some type of business.

Paul: Is it a large building or is it ...

Steven F.: It is pretty big.

Paul: It's a big building?

Steven F.: It's just two floors, but the square footage is pretty big.

Paul: Yeah? [00:12:30] Tall or just ...

Steven F.: Wide.

Paul: Okay. Is there anything else about that job site that you could talk about? Specifically, is it multiple levels?

Steven F.: It's got two levels. It's different than being in the typical Manhattan style job, where you're in this big building and ...

Paul: Where is it?

Steven F.: It's in Long Island City. [00:13:00] For Long Island City, it's a pretty big establishment, but it's old, run down.

Paul: What's the neighborhood like?

Steven F.: Industrial.

Paul: Industrial? Okay. What do you like about your current job site?

Steven F.: I like that it's not in Manhattan. I like that it's in a place where you can look out a window and [00:13:30] see people walk by, you know what I mean? You can walk outside and breathe some fresh air and be like, "Wow, okay." Because you're stuck in a building ...

Paul: You're stuck in a building.

Steven F.: Yeah. On like the 23rd floor, what are you going to do? You're going to stare out the window. It's not like you can even open it. There's usually no air.

Paul: That's true.

Steven F.: You know?

Paul: What sort of work do you find yourself doing right now?

Steven F.: We're doing a lot of wire splicing right now, [00:14:00] I guess. Doing a lot of circuitry.

Paul: A lot of circuitry, a lot of wire splicing. What does that mean, you're doing circuitry, for someone who doesn't know what doing circuitry?

Steven F.: We're specifically, we're doing lighting and different zones are on different circuits. In order to light up one particular zone, you have to liven up [00:14:30] one particular circuit and those little wires where ... There's a lot of factors, you know?

Paul: Yeah.

Steven F.: Because the job-

Paul: And you have to know all these factors?

Steven F.: Yes, and because the job was handed off to five different people, it makes it worse.

Paul: What do you mean it was handed off to five different people?

Steven F.: Sal started it.

Paul: Who is Sal?

Steven F.: Sal is a person in the shop who is an A journeyman [00:15:00] who runs work every now and then for the shop, so he started it. Then it was passed on to, who else was it? Steve [Antico 00:15:09] took over.

Paul: Who is Steve Antico? Another ...

Steven F.: Now he's an A Journeyman.

Paul: Okay. So you're saying there were multiple ...

Steven F.: Multiple bosses and-

Paul: That were taken on and off the job.

Steven F.: Right, and each person has to try to figure out where the last person left off and pick up from where [00:15:30] they left off.

Paul: How do you know how to ...

Steven F.: Think?

Paul: Yeah. Let's say someone left you with a project. How do you ...

Steven F.: Also, other things can come into factor too. There's a GC on the job who works for the person that hires ... They are the people that hire you, the electrical company, to come work in their establishment that [00:16:00] they are building. Basically, they would come to us with a priority thing, a priority like, "You guys have to get this done like now. This has to happen now." So you have to stop what you're doing, whatever it was, go work on whatever they told you to do, finish it, hopefully, then be able to go back to what you were doing, remember where you left off.

Paul: It sounds like a lot of navigating.

Steven F.: Yes.

Paul: [00:16:30] How many years have you been a Local 3 member?

Steven F.: Five.

Paul: Five? Okay. Can you tell me about the first day?

Steven F.: [crosstalk 00:16:46] My first day on the job. The first shop I was ever with, ASR. It was at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. We were doing a fire alarm [refab 00:16:58] at Columbia Presbyterian on the [00:17:00] Westside, all the way up the Westside. My first day on the job, I lucked out because the guys that were working for ASR at the time



were nice, a bunch of really cool guys. They knew I was a TA1, it was my first day on the job. I was an older TA1. I wasn't a young kid.

Paul: How old are you?

Steven F.: I'm 37 now. So figure I was 32.

Paul: [00:17:30] So what would be a young TA1?

Steven F.: 19 year olds.

Paul: What's a TA1?

Steven F.: TA1 is a first year apprentice that hasn't been sworn into the local yet. They're still on a trial run type of thing.

Paul: Interesting. You are the older guy on this new job.

Steven F.: Right, first day, very green.

Paul: Older TA1 on this, a green.

Steven F.: They treated me good. They showed me the ropes. They taught me all the material.

Paul: [00:18:00] Okay, were you familiar with any of the material?

Steven F.: A little, but not all of it.

Paul: What were you familiar with?

Steven F.: The very basic, so like wire nuts and stuff like that. I really didn't know much. I didn't do electrical construction, so I really didn't know the technical terminology for a lot of the stuff.

Paul: I see. Did you know how to read a blueprint or stuff like that?

Steven F.: Vaguely, yeah. But now I know what [00:18:30] all the symbols are and everything like that. I can tell you where everything goes. Then I would just, it was very basic, very, very basic. I really didn't know.

Paul: You didn't know. How did you go about learning your trade?

Steven F.: School.

Paul: School? What kind of school?

Steven F.: Electrical theory, where they teach you how to read blueprints.

Paul: They do teach you how to read blueprints, okay.

Steven F.: I learned a lot there.

Paul: Is there any other? Did you learn a [00:19:00] lot?

Steven F.: I'm learning more about blueprints now at this particular shop I'm with now.

Paul: Why is that?

Steven F.: At the other shops, I was doing mostly big pipe, a lot of pipe work and a lot of ... I was never given a print and said, "Here." Here's a print. Figure it out. This needs to go there, that needs to go there." No, I was told just, "We got to run three in from here to [00:19:30] there."

Paul: You were told this. Were you told how to run pipe-

Steven F.: Yes.

Paul: ... from here to there?

Steven F.: Yeah. All the bending and the measuring and the D ducts and the training and stuff.

Paul: They showed you how to do this?

Steven F.: Yes.

Paul: So you were basically working under someone directly?

Steven F.: Yes. You know what? You know how some apprentices get, "This is my journeyman, [00:20:00] me and him." I never actually had that. The five or six guys I was with, I was their apprentice. I would run back between each person, but whoever needed me the most, I would stay with.

Paul: Do you feel like there was a reason why you got boxed into doing the larger pipe or ...

Steven F.: I don't know. I really don't know. I think it's just luck of the draw when you get [00:20:30] rotated. They say that they want to rotate you into different jobs so you get a different view of all the electrical work, you get a different aspect of everything. You get some shops that just primarily do big pipe work, and you do that for a little while, but then you'll move on to a different shop that does a lot of refab work that you do a lot of, be selling a lot of BX back and forth and stuff like that.

Paul: What's refab work?

Steven F.: Like an office space. You rebuild an office space, and you [inaudible 00:20:57] like this now, and you [00:21:00] have to run all the circuitry and stuff. That's totally different

from that other type ... I was with a shop called J-Star Electric, a very small shop out of the Bronx. All they did was big pipe. They did a lot metal fabrication.

Paul: Okay, what's that?

Steven F.: Basically, if we had to run some big [gal 00:21:22] ... We did a lot of work on the Throgs Neck Bridge.

Paul: That sounds cool.

Steven F.: We had to run galvanized pipe along a catwalk. [00:21:30] So we had these metal pieces that we were able to bolt onto the side of the catwalk. So we made them specifically for that particular catwalk and that particular space so that each would fit a certain way and we'd be able to strap, U-bolt this thing along the way. It was cool. He had them all made specifically for that. You can't buy them. They don't make those regularly, you know?

Paul: That's amazing.

Steven F.: It was cool. We were doing work at the Smith and 9th Street train station in Brooklyn and [00:22:00] they have a huge escalator. So what he had made was ... They'd put a coffin over the escalator, which basically a wood coffin over it so that you could walk on it.

Paul: That's what it's called, a coffin?

Steven F.: A coffin, yeah. We were able to put up these giant light fixtures above the escalator. So he had this cart made up that had a hydrologic lift thing to lift the light, and it was a pulley.

Paul: It was made up? Meaning you had it made specifically designed for this job?

Steven F.: he designed it, yeah, so it would fit [00:22:30] the size ... It was perfect. The wheels he even specifically had made and everything.

Paul: Where did he get this fabricated?

Steven F.: He has like a metal guy that he works with.

Paul: Oh, wow.

Steven F.: He would make a print and give it to the guy and the guy would create it.

Paul: That's amazing.

Steven F.: Because it's a hydrologic lift, it would lift the light up and then we had a little pulley engine that would pull it up to the next place where the light would go. It was cool, it was cool.

Paul: Oh my god. That sounds great. Wait, working on the bridge?

Steven F.: On the bridge, I was with the same company [00:23:00] and it was great. We had little quads. We had to run pipe from one end of the bridge all the way to the other, so once you get to the halfway point ... As an apprentice, you have to go get coffee break for everybody. So I'm half way between-

Paul: You have to get coffee break is ...

Steven F.: Coffee break is a mandatory thing for apprentices. You have to get break from the A guys.

Paul: How would you go?

Steven F.: We had a quad. You figure I'm halfway between the Bronx and Queens on this [00:23:30] bridge, and we would park on the Bronx side. So I would get on the quad, go all the way back to the Bronx side, go down the ladder, get in my car, go get coffee.

Paul: Oh my gosh, you had to get in your car to do it?

Steven F.: Yeah, because the bridge wasn't close to anything.

Paul: That's crazy.

Steven F.: Then you had to come back. I had to bring all the bags up. I had to wrap all the coffees special because underneath the bridge was a suspended decking, so it would go like this and be like [00:24:00] dips.

Paul: Wow.

Steven F.: So when we were on the quad, it would go (noise).

Paul: No way.

Steven F.: So the coffee is flying everywhere.

Paul: Really [crosstalk 00:24:04]

Steven F.: Yeah. I had to wrap it in cellophane plastic and then put the lid on top so it wouldn't go anywhere.

Paul: This is amazing. How long would this take you?

Steven F.: It took me a while. I left about 45 to an hour early to make sure I got everything.

Paul: How many people were you working with on the bridge?

Steven F.: At that guy, I had like seven guys that I was working with.

Paul: Is that average you think, an average number?

Steven F.: I think [00:24:30] so. I think there's, what is it? Five guys, there has to be one apprentice or something like that.

Paul: It's that little?

Steven F.: Is it? I think so, yeah. I think, yeah. For every five guys, there should be one apprentice.

Paul: One apprentice.

Steven F.: If I was seven of us, whatever. It wasn't a big deal.

Paul: Being that you were working with all this [00:25:00] big pipe fabricated material and on a bridge, was there ever a point at work where you felt uncomfortable working with a tool or?

Steven F.: Yes. Yeah, especially on the bridge.

Paul: Like in a location?

Steven F.: Yeah. We had to work in the anchorage of the bridge, which is where all those big bridge cables go into this giant [00:25:30] block of stone they create, that goes through and it gets anchored into stone like this big. The anchorage is high. One day, we couldn't get onto the bridge from the road, which is usually how we go. You know the crash trucks, crash trucks are?

Paul: No.

Steven F.: They're those big trucks that have those big yellow plastic backings. You see them and they'll block a whole lane off, and then the arrow pointing that way. Basically, you'll hit that truck. If you do careen into them, it'll block whatever [00:26:00] ... So we would go with a crash truck, and they would stop, they would block the whole lane. We'd get off and we'd go down from the top, which is much easier and better way to get into the anchorage. One day, we couldn't. We had to go climb from the base.

Paul: No.

Steven F.: Yeah. I don't know if you have ever heard of Maritime College, it's a Merchant Marine Academy?

Paul: Yeah.

Steven F.: Okay. On the base of the college is where the anchorage is, so we had to go in and climb up this little ass ladder over [00:26:30] a hundred feet, all the way up.

Paul: Oh my god. A hundred feet?

Steven F.: Way over.

Paul: What?

Steven F.: I took pictures. Half way up, I froze with fear. I was like, "Oh my God." It's just you hanging off this little ladder.

Paul: Oh my god.

Steven F.: And it's like wet.

Paul: Are you in a harness?

Steven F.: You know what? They offered me the harness, but the thing is with the harness is, if you wear a harness, now you have to unclip it, go clip it again, right.

Paul: Every ...

Steven F.: Unclip it, clip it, no. I was like, "You know what? I'm just [00:27:00] going, I'm just flying up this ladder."

Paul: Oh my gosh.

Steven F.: I'm going, (noise). I look down and I'm like, "Holy shit." So now I'm [inaudible 00:27:06] It was hard for me to even get like [inaudible 00:27:09] I was like [inaudible 00:27:09] I was like, "Oh my god." I finally get to the top. I'm not a small person. I finally get to the top. It's a little hole, just a little. I'm like, "How the hell am I going to squeeze my fat ass through this?" I get up, (noise), get through. That was the last time I ever did that. I was like, "You guys can't pay me enough money to ever do that again."

Paul: Really?

Steven F.: Yeah, [00:27:30] but they suckered me into doing it a couple more times.

Paul: That's horrifying.

Steven F.: Horrifying.

Paul: That sounds horrifying.

Steven F.: It was terrible. Engines are flying around ...

Paul: Oh my gosh. Is there any way to prepare for that mentally?

Steven F.: You know what, no. The best way to get over the fear, to me personally, is just to just throw yourself in it, immerse yourself in it. Just go for it, dive in. You're never going to [00:28:00] be ready for it. If you think you're going to will yourself into it, you're not. You just have to do it. Once you put yourself in that situation, then you'll be like, "Okay, I can deal with this." Or you can't and then you'll freak out.

Paul: Would you consider that like, "This is out of my hands," kind of moment?

Steven F.: On the bridge?

Paul: Yeah.

Steven F.: [00:28:30] Yeah.

Paul: You just have to go?

Steven F.: Yeah.

Paul: There was no alternatives?

Steven F.: No, and that's it. It's like being on that giant ladder, because now let's say you climb halfway up. It's like really, you got to just keep going. It doesn't matter how scared you are now. Now it's like, "You're halfway up, go." What's the guy that works for [00:29:00] the shop that prices the job?

Paul: The estimator?

Steven F.: The estimator. The estimator that worked for that particular shop went there, climbed about half way up-

Paul: No.

Steven F.: ... froze.

Paul: And went back down?

Steven F.: Started, "Ah!" No, he wouldn't go down and he wouldn't go up. He stood halfway. Because halfway was this little platform where you could stand on it and just take a breather. It was a little, a tiny little ... So he got to that thing and he crawled ... He got into a fetal position on it and he wouldn't move.

Paul: [00:29:30] Was it windy?

Steven F.: No, it's inside this huge anchorage.

Paul: Wow, oh my gosh.

Steven F.: Picture being inside a ...

Paul: I don't know if I could even picture it.

Steven F.: Like a catacomb, that's what it's kind of like. It's like being inside this creepy Aliens movie or something. It's really ... So he froze and it took all day to get him down. He wouldn't come down.

Paul: Oh my Gosh. Wow, that's a scared out of your mind kind of moment.

Steven F.: [00:30:00] It was really scary. But we had to run pipe across it. There's a little catwalk that went across the top of it, from one end to the other like this, and we had to get on that catwalk, so it's even higher now.

Paul: And now you're exposed to the elements.

Steven F.: Right. Now, wind forget about it, wind. One day on the bridge, it was so super windy that this bird, this seagull was like a seagull bomb. It got caught up in the wind and couldn't fight it, and (noise) and came, feathers everywhere. We were like, "What the fuck [00:30:30] was that?"

Paul: What was it?

Steven F.: It was a seagull. It hit the metal. It just exploded.

Paul: No.

Steven F.: (noise), yeah. And we were like, "Oh!" It was incredible.

Paul: Oh my god.

Steven F.: It was incredible.

Paul: This is amazing.

Steven F.: It was a lot of fun.

Paul: It sounds pretty cool. I don't know if I would want to be out in those elements, but it sounds pretty impressive.

Steven F.: It ruined my cell phone.

Paul: It ruined your cell phone?

Steven F.: Because it was so cold. I had my cell phone in my pocket because there's no place else to put it.



Paul: When were you working [00:31:00] on this job?

Steven F.: It went from the spring and winter, I mean fall and winter.

Paul: One season?

Steven F.: Yeah.

Paul: I mean, one year?

Steven F.: Yes. It was so cold that the battery in my phone went (noise).

Paul: It just couldn't handle it anymore.

Steven F.: Yeah, it just crapped out.

Paul: How did you deal with the cold on the bridge?

Steven F.: Let me tell you something, layers. Layers and layers, and still, sometimes some days were very unproductive. You would pick up one piece of pipe, install [00:31:30] it, and by the time ... Your hands were so cold now from just touching that. We would be like, "Ah!" We would all get on the quads and shoot back to our cars and heat ourselves back up inside our cars, and we were shaking.

Paul: Oh my god.

Steven F.: Yeah, it was really terrible.

Paul: Wow. Are these typical kind of days or is that an atypical kind of day?

Steven F.: No. For that shop, maybe it'd be a typical kind of day, but that's not what everybody does in the Local. That's just that ...

Paul: Can you walk me through [00:32:00] a typical day at the job for you?

Steven F.: At my current job?

Paul: Yeah. A typical day at the current shop that you're at.

Steven F.: I get there. It's a seven o'clock start, so we start at seven.

Paul: Who designates that time?

Steven F.: I guess it's the Local.

Paul: The Local does?

Steven F.: It's a seven o'clock start for everyone, [00:32:30] typically. Unless you're something ... It's a certain type of job and some deal was worked out where you might start at six, or maybe you start at eight. Or you're working at an establishment that doesn't allow you to start until eight or nine.

Paul: So your day starts and then?

Steven F.: Day starts and then you start working. You either pick up where you left off the last day before or your foreman tells you what to do, what he wants done, and you go and do it. [00:33:00] Then coffee break rolls around, nine o'clock, take your break.

Paul: So you're not working with heavy pipe on a typical day?

Steven F.: Right now, no. [crosstalk 00:33:14]

Paul: And you said you're working with blueprints now more often?

Steven F.: Yes. Which now that I'm much more familiar with all the symbols and, you know.

Paul: [00:33:30] Which you wouldn't of been ...

Steven F.: Working for these other shops? No.

Paul: What about your co-workers? What's the demographic of your job site? What's the mix up?

Steven F.: There's, what did I say, seven of us? There's one, two, three, four, five, six of us.

Paul: Okay. What is the break-up? Are they older, are they younger?

Steven F.: Is it six of us?

Paul: [00:34:00] Are they A mechanics?

Steven F.: Five of us. There's five of us and one is an A mechanic, four is MIJs.

Paul: Does that number change on this job site?

Steven F.: Just recently, it was just two MIJs, me and this other kid, Mike, for a while and we were getting work done, but it got to the point where a lot of the work [00:34:30] that we were waiting to get answers for, we didn't know what they wanted.

Paul: There was just two of you for a period-

Steven F.: There was just two of us for a period of time and then once more work came to fruition, we had him put in a request for more guys.

Paul: They just show up from the Local?

Steven F.: From the shop. You tell the super of the shop and he goes and he allocates [00:35:00] more people to your job.

Paul: Depending.

Steven F.: Depending on if other jobs can afford to lose these people.

Paul: Okay, are these guys ...

Steven F.: Terrible, no they're not.

Paul: No, I wasn't going to ask that. Are these guys your age, are they from the same neighborhood as you?

Steven F.: A lot of the MIJs that I work with are in my age. I'm not going to say age group, because I tend to be a little older than everybody, [00:35:30] but they're at the same stage of progression I am at in the Local. They are at the same stage. Yeah, they're all good.

Paul: Let's see what else. What are some of the skills that are necessary, that you think help [00:36:00] move the work along? What type of skills?

Steven F.: What kind of skills?

Paul: Yeah, you mentioned being able to work with other people.

Steven F.: That's huge. If you're the guy that nobody could ever get along with and everybody loves to hate, you're going to have a big problem. People are going to not going to want to work with you. They're going to actually request not to work with [00:36:30] you and you're probably going to get laid off a lot in your career because ...

Paul: Do you feel like you excel at anything?

Steven F.: That I particularly excel at something?

Paul: Like skill set?

Steven F.: You know what, I do like to bend pipe. I do like to do pipe work.

Paul: Okay, and what skills do you need to pipe work?

Steven F.: I feel like if you are a person that's a good [00:37:00] artist, you should be a person that does really good pipe work.

Paul: Why do you think art ...

Steven F.: Because it's got a lot to do with having a vision of ... A lot of the times when I look at pipe work, if I'm told, "Okay, we need to run one inch or three quarter from here to here." I first envision [00:37:30] it in my head.

Paul: Interesting.

Steven F.: Then I try to play it out, I try to do it. Most of the time, I'll get to a certain point and be like, "Oh, it'll probably be better if I do it this way and made it a little easier or look better," as you go along. I guess you have to have a good eye.

Paul: You have to have a good eye.

Steven F.: You have to have a good eye. You have to be able to take accurate measurements. You have to be able to know how [00:38:00] to use a tape measure.

Paul: Is there math involved?

Steven F.: Yes, there's math involved. You got to know your D ducts, which is based on the size of the pipe. I don't know what you call it. [inaudible 00:38:13]

Paul: When you run your pipe, how do you map out where it has to go? How do you figure that part out?

Steven F.: I don't know. [00:38:30] It's based on the establishment you're in, I guess. Or like, am I running it-

Paul: Are there obstacles that you have to ...

Steven F.: Yeah, am I running it above a drop ceiling, is it exposed, do I need to hang it from something, how can I support it? There's a whole big thing. It's a whole big process. Every situation is different.

Paul: Is there someone telling you where to, or at this point ...

Steven F.: A lot of the time, the foreman [00:39:00] will come up to you and say, "I want it over here. I want it to go this way. This is how I want it to go." Which is good, which is better for you, the installer, because now you're like, "All right, I'll just do what he wants. It's perfect."

Paul: You said you did a lot of big pipe and you like pipe work. You also say that it's artistic, or you need an artistic eye.

Steven F.: I kind of do feel like ...

Paul: Do you ever feel like your work is creative in nature? [00:39:30] Or is it like ...

Steven F.: I just feel like, especially when you're doing concentric bends right next to each and stuff, you want everything to seamlessly look like everything is nice and perfectly spaced and even and all the bends are correct and even. Afterwards, when you're done, you look back at it, you're like, "Wow, that looked great." Some guys [00:40:00] don't care.

Paul: What do you mean they don't care?

Steven F.: I'll look back at something like that after I am done, finished with it and I'll say "Wow, that's great. It's awesome. Look at that."

Paul: So there are moments where ...

Steven F.: You get a sense of accomplishment like, "Wow, look at that. I did that, it's cool."

Paul: Do you ever get compliments? Have you ever been complimented?

Steven F.: A few times. Not as much as I'd like to have been complimented, but you know.

Paul: Who complimented you?

Steven F.: Nobody [00:40:30] in this shop, I'll tell you straight out. I worked for EJ Electric for a little while, they were like, "Wow, dude." You know what it is? Everybody, especially in this line of work, I feel like everybody thinks their pipe work is the best. So you're always critiqued very harshly by others.

Paul: [00:41:00] Artistry, that's to the eye of the beholder whether they think it's good or not, right? Is it the same with pipe work?

Steven F.: I do feel like it is.

Paul: Some people ...

Steven F.: Some people will be like, "Wow, that looks great." And some other guy will come along and be like, "It looks like crap." Who knows. Some people like it, some people ... Some people are more easily impressed.

Paul: [00:41:30] Have you ever passed the tool down or had a tool passed down to you?

Steven F.: I have had tools passed down to me and ...

Paul: By who?

Steven F.: There was a foreman for EJ that gave me a couple of tools. He actually ordered for me specifically.

Paul: He ordered them for you specifically?

Steven F.: Yeah.

Paul: Was it for a specific job or?

Steven F.: It was just because he knew I didn't have [00:42:00] one, so he ordered it. It's a very big shop, EJs. The stuff they get is just, you know.

Paul: What do you mean?

Steven F.: They can order tools and nobody is going to question it. A smaller shop where ...

Paul: They could order tools for everybody and not question it?

Steven F.: He can just turn around and say, "The kid, the apprentice ..." Because usually, they were easier on the apprentices because they don't make as much money as the A journeyman. So they would say, "The kid dropped [00:42:30] his pliers down the shaft. We gotta get him a new pair of pliers because it's not right," and nobody will question it.

Paul: Is there any specific passing down of a tools? Is there a specific story goes along with it or was it just like? Or was he just like, "I see this kid has no tools and ..."

Steven F.: Actually, I was able to get a reamer from Danny.

Paul: Danny? Who's Danny?

Steven F.: [00:43:00] Danny Burkstrom, this kid. Not kid. I'm actually older than him, but he's an E journeyman already, but he's an awesome guy and ...

Paul: Why did he give you that tool?

Steven F.: Because every day, I would break his chops, and I would say, "Hey, man, I'd would be so much easier if I had a reamer, you know?" "All right, all right. Fine."

Paul: And he just gave you his?

Steven F.: He called it in.

Paul: Oh, really.

Steven F.: He goes, "These kids breaking my chops. They need a reamer. They don't have any reamer. We're doing all three quarter pipe. [00:43:30] Reamer, reamer." And they sent one.

Paul: That tool in particular, you needed for the task at hand?

Steven F.: Yeah, it made it a hell of a lot easier, yeah. The right tool for the right job.

Paul: What does it mean to you to be a Union member? I think we went over this a little bit, but ...

Steven F.: Right. To me, it does mean a lot. It gives me a sense of being part of something much bigger than myself.

Paul: [00:44:00] Really?

Steven F.: Yeah.

Paul: Can you expand that a little bit more?

Steven F.: For instance, when I worked for that J-Star shop, a lot guys were brought into the Local with the shop when the shop became a Union shop. So these guys didn't go through-

Paul: So they were non-Union workers prior?

Steven F.: Prior, and then they became Union workers, but they didn't go through the apprenticeship the way I did and stuff like that.

Paul: What did they go through? Or do you know?

Steven F.: I don't know, really. They just went through. I guess [00:44:30] they just took a test. I don't know how it is. They were M guys, which is a different division. But they were brought in with the shop when the shop ...

Paul: So the shop was non-Union.

Steven F.: Right.

Paul: It got brought in, it got absorbed by the Union.

Steven F.: It got absorbed and they were given cards.

Paul: Okay. Were they given cards?

Steven F.: I think so. I don't really ...

Paul: You don't know the specifics?

Steven F.: I don't know the specifically. I think they were tested.

Paul: Did they act differently compared to you or any other journeyman?

Steven F.: They didn't act differently, no. [00:45:00] They didn't act differently. When working with them, they were great. They were great. We all went to the Labor Day Parade one year, and I feel like it was primarily because I was breaking all their chops to go and-

Paul: Why were you breaking their chops to go?

Steven F.: Well, because from going to the apprentice meetings at the Hall. [00:45:30] They were like, "Just really try to bring somebody. Try to get these guys to go. If we don't have a strong presence, it's not going to look good, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So I broke their chops and they actually agreed to go. So we all go and there's thousands of us at this Labor Day Parade. The Local 3 has a huge presence there, right?

Paul: Yeah.

Steven F.: Afterwards, he actually turned to me. He was like, "Yo, man, this is the first time I actually feel like I'm part of something. [00:46:00] Look at this." He was like, "Damn." He was in awe of it.

Paul: So this was a guy who wasn't familiar with this.

Steven F.: Who wasn't familiar, but was in Local and then after seeing the immensity of ...

Paul: There a lot of people there.

Steven F.: Yeah, the amount of the people that is doing the same job he does every single day.

Paul: Did they work differently compared to how you work now?

Steven F.: Yes, because they were just doing [00:46:30] a different type of electrical work. They would conform to want I'm doing now if need be. They would just start doing that.

Paul: Is there a favorite Local 3 tradition that you have?

Steven F.: That's a good question. Favorite Local 3 tradition. I like at the meetings when they announce the numbers and everybody goes (whistle).

Paul: I don't [00:47:00] get that. What is that about? Do you know what that's about?

Steven F.: I guess maybe the numbers used to be a lot bigger. So guys used to go, (whistle).

Paul: What about that do you like?

Steven F.: I just think it's funny. Now they wait for it. They say the number and he's like ... And then when everybody whistles, he's like, "Awww, thanks guys."

Paul: Who's thanking them?

Steven F.: I forgot his name. He's the [00:47:30] guy that runs the M division. You know who I'm talking about?

Paul: So it's a specific person that tells you an amount?



Steven F.: Yeah, he gives you like, "This is how much money that we paid out and blah, blah, blah." He gives you all these statistical numbers that they paid, or they have in the bank, or whatever the case, and everybody whistles. Like, "Whoa."

Paul: And that's your favorite.

Steven F.: You know what, that's a lame favorite. I don't really know the favorite. What could [00:48:00] it be? There's so many good stuff.

Paul: Yeah, is there?

Steven F.: I don't know, I really don't know. He's like, "Yeah, really?"

Paul: I'm curious. As an electrician, are there any aspirations you have in your career with this?

Steven F.: Yeah, you know what my aspiration is? I want to survive-

Paul: Survive?

Steven F.: ... until retirement and just make it.

Paul: Why do you say survive? Is it [00:48:30] dangerous?

Steven F.: It is. I got electrocuted today, mildly.

Paul: You got electrocuted or you got shocked?

Steven F.: I got hit with a little bit of electricity. Yeah, shocked, I guess you could say. But God knows what can happen.

Paul: Have you ever been injured on the job?

Steven F.: No, not seriously.

Paul: What happened? What's an injury?

Steven F.: Just little zaps here and there.

Paul: Zaps here and there? Have you ever seen someone get injured?

Steven F.: You know what, no. Thank God. Because if I ever saw somebody really get blown up, I'd be damaged from it. I don't [00:49:00] know.

Paul: What do you mean by get blown up?

Steven F.: For instance, when I was working for EJ Electric, we were working in a Verizon building and we were installing a brand new service because of Sandy. Sandy, we had to move up their service to the second floor and we had to put in all new switch gear, big giant switch gear. Big, big copper busts, exposed busts and stuff like that. They had a wrench in the, what [00:49:30] do they call that? It's like the ...

Paul: They had a wrench in what, a lug?

Steven F.: No, there's this switch.

Paul: What do you mean they have to wrench it in?

Steven F.: It's like a big, long wrench they use to tighten up ... I guess it's a lug, yeah. It's to tighten up a lug and it's on live busts. It was live.

Paul: What's a live bust?

Steven F.: Live bust is like a giant piece of copper that delivers power to [00:50:00] something, to ...

Paul: The building?

Steven F.: Right, a portion of the building. One wrong move and something can happen inside that bust where if something like arcs, an arc or electricity or something that it generates a tremendous amount of heat. Somebody can get severely hurt bad, burnt.

Paul: Have you ever heard of stories where ...

Steven F.: Yeah, we're shown videos in school [00:50:30] and stuff, people getting blown up. I've seen YouTube videos. Once that happens, you're in bad shape.

Paul: You personally, do you feel like the work itself is wearing your body down?

Steven F.: I don't want to say yes, but kind of. Because I'm, like I said, a little older and I feel like it's beating up the legs a little bit. It's just whatever. I can deal with it, but you [00:51:00] feel it. I'm feeling it in some joints now.

Paul: You are? In joints?

Steven F.: Need a little WD-40 or something.

Paul: Good thing you have benefits, right?

Steven F.: There you go.

Paul: Are there times where your work feels particularly meaningful?

Steven F.: Is there times [00:51:30] that you feel your work feels particularly meaningful? I feel like what we do is, we provide what people take for granted every day. We provide that for them.

Paul: How so?

Steven F.: You plug something into a wall. You don't think about it, you just plug it in, it works. We're the ones that create that situation. We're doing the [00:52:00] job that if it wasn't for us, you wouldn't have all these little luxuries that humankind has come so used to and doesn't really think much about it.

Paul: You find this to be a luxury, right?

Steven F.: Yeah, but I find it to be rewarding in a sense, because I feel like I'm doing a job that's really important because that's huge.

Paul: But taken for granted?

Steven F.: Definitely taken for granted and definitely, it's [00:52:30] a thankless job. A person that hires you tells you, "I want outlets all along here and I want this and I want that." When the job is done and everything is beautiful and perfect and really awesome and everything works, they're just like, "All right. That's cool."

Paul: And they don't realize.

Steven F.: Right. They don't realize the blood, sweat, and tears that went into it. They see a really nice [inaudible 00:52:54] and they don't really think of it as, "Oh, wow. Look how nice that is." They're just like, "Yeah, it works. It's [00:53:00] supposed to be like that."

Paul: There's nothing for them to say. See, you're helping them understand this now. Do you ever take work home with you?

Steven F.: I try not to.

Paul: Does it ever merge?

Steven F.: No.

Paul: No?

Steven F.: No.

Paul: Not for you?

Steven F.: No way.

Paul: Do you think ...

Steven F.: Listen, this type of work.

Paul: Tell [00:53:30] me.

Steven F.: If you bring it home with you ... If you're so stressed out from something that happened to you during the day that you're bringing it home to you, and I don't know, slapping around your wife or something like that, this is not the job for you, you know what I mean? You don't bring this type of stuff home. This isn't like a deadline at the office and you're so stressed out, no.

Paul: Like two different worlds?

Steven F.: Yeah.

Paul: In the future, do you think your children or other members [00:54:00] of the community will do the same kind of work?

Steven F.: Like get my kids involved in the Local, and maybe they'll become electricians too? Is that what you're saying?

Paul: Yeah. Do you think that ...

Steven F.: You know what, if my kid wanted to, it's a great job.

Paul: Do you think he'll be working the same way you work now? Do you think he'll be using the same material, the same ...

Steven F.: Sure. Our work, it's like a universal thing. [00:54:30] The Local teaches you to work the same way the next guy works. We all install pipe the same way, we all install outlets the same way, we all install breakers the same way, everything's the same, the same process. It's a uniform thing. All the stuff we use is the same, all the material is the same. Unless they come out with some new material that's ground-breaking, it makes life so much easier. It's got to be approved [00:55:00] and goes through this whole process. But if they do, then fine. Maybe it will become some sort of standard. We'll use it. But it's highly unlikely.

Paul: Do you have any advice for someone starting in your field?

Steven F.: As an apprentice?

Paul: Yeah, like when you get to pass down your guidance as an M4.

Steven F.: I'm going to say, "Look, it's tough, it's hard, you might get picked on."

Paul: Why do you say you might get picked on?

Steven F.: You might not. [00:55:30] Because you're the apprentice, you're like the kid. Everyone calls you kid and you got to go get coffee break for everybody. You're pretty much the gofer. "Go get me this, go get me that, go get this, go get that." It does make you a better electrician-

Paul: It does?

Steven F.: ... in the long run, yes. Once you get to the point where you're handing your journeyman that you're working with material before he's even able to ask for it, [00:56:00] then you've got it. If you're doing the job in your head quicker than he could physically do it in front of you, you've got it. You're good. Everything that happens to you as an apprentice, whether it feels wrong or not, it's all for a purpose. It all has a meaning.

Paul: In all of this [00:56:30] fun stuff, all of this danger that you've hurdled over and all this knowledge that you have, do you feel like you're compensated adequately for your job?

Steven F.: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Paul: Compared to Madonna's wage?

Steven F.: You know what? What job are you going to be able to make like 56 bucks an hour, get-

Paul: More.

Steven F.: Right, more than that actually. The benefits that [00:57:00] we get and the 401k that we get. Some guys are retiring with like a million bucks in their 401k. What job is going to actually give that to you nowadays actually? Send you to school. Get you a college degree.

Paul: Yeah, that's a lot.

Steven F.: You're not paying for that, by the way.

Paul: [00:57:30] Even though it reeks havoc to your body and all that stuff and it's super dangerous?

Steven F.: Every job does something. Any job where you have repetition motions, you get carpal tunnel, whatever the [inaudible 00:57:43]. Something is going to bother somebody at every job, it's going to get you something bad, so it doesn't matter.

Paul: Has anyone ever passed down a trick or advice to you?

Steven F.: Yeah, I can't specifically [00:58:00] give you one because there's tons of crap. You'll be working with old timers that'll be like, "Hey, do it like this. This is much easier." And you learn, "Wow, okay." They show you the better way.

Paul: Is there a particular story that you'll never forget from work or something like that?

Steven F.: Oh my God, story. [00:58:30] I've heard so many.

Paul: Or something that you've been a part of, maybe. Like on the job.

Steven F.: You know what it is, there's stupid crap that is important to you, the person, that you're going to remember, that you're going to look back and chuckle to yourself. Like, "Aw, that was funny." There's tons of crap that I look back now and it makes me smile. Stuff like that has [00:59:00] happened. Everybody's different, everybody's experiences are going to be different.

Paul: I'm just curious if there's a story that ...

Steven F.: One particular one? I don't know. I have too many.

Paul: The bridge is pretty good.

Steven F.: The bridge one. There's so many I can give you from the bridge. So many. The bridge had hawks that lived on top of the bridge. One flew down and flew too low and got into the water. So [00:59:30] me and this other guy got two sticks of, I think it was [inaudible 00:59:34] of water. We got the damn thing out of the water. Grabbed onto the stick and lifted it up. And you see the bird fly by and you're like, "Oh." This thing is huge. Like in real life in front of you, it is huge. It's got these giant talons. It was sopping wet. We just put it down onto the deck and it just was staring at us as if to say, "I'm not going to pull your eyes out now because you saved me, but [01:00:00] whatever." It was huge. We were like, "Geez, look at this thing."

Paul: Are you a part of any clubs or anything like that?

Steven F.: I've been to a few club meetings. I played softball for the Brooklyn club once or twice, but I didn't actually join any clubs.

Paul: Do [01:00:30] you think the clubs help-

Steven F.: I do. I think it's a good thing.

Paul: ... maintain the strength of the Union?

Steven F.: I do. The clubs are awesome. I think the clubs are huge. I would like to join a club, but right now, my personal life is a little crazy, but once that calms down, I could probably join a club and I would. I think clubs are great. I think they're the way to go.

Paul: Do you think the schooling and stuff like that strengthens Union [01:01:00] ...

Steven F.: Yes, absolutely.

Paul: How so?

Steven F.: The schooling?

Paul: Yeah.

Steven F.: It teaches you the theory of what you're physically doing every day. It teaches you the ...

Paul: Do you think gathering your brothers and sisters together helps ... Do you think that helps strengthen your bond or do you just go through school and go home?

Steven F.: Yeah, because over your career, you're going to [01:01:30] be working with these people.

Paul: Do you ever participate in things outside of school and work with these people?

Steven F.: You're given the opportunity to, yeah, and you should, yes. If you do it, you get to know ... The more people you get to know, the better.

Paul: In the Local?

Steven F.: In the Local.

Paul: And it will keep it strong?

Steven F.: It will keep it strong, it will keep you strong, it will keep your job strong. You never know who you're in school with, who is going to become the next big foreman [01:02:00] at some big shop, you know what I'm saying? You never know who's who and who's going to become what. It's better to be friendly with everybody.

Paul: Interesting. We'll end with, is there anything that inspires you? Inspires you to wake up in the morning, inspires you on ...

Steven F.: Yeah, I work with this kid, Paul Vance, and he inspires me every day.

Paul: No, he does [01:02:30] not.

Steven F.: Inspires me to get up in the morning?

Paul: Or just inspires you in general, whether it be work or how you work. Is there a figure that you ...

Steven F.: I guess just having a job that I know is going to provide for the family that I intend to start. [01:03:00] That's the inspiration right there.

Paul: So it's family?

Steven F.: Yeah, I guess it's family, yeah.

Paul: That motivates you.

Steven F.: It is, yeah.

Paul: That you intend to have?

Steven F.: Sure.

Paul: Sure.

Steven F.: Yes.

Paul: Perfect. Thank you, Steven, for this lovely interview and we're out.

Steven F.: You're welcome.